

Compassionate Politics

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Deborah Stone, author of *The Samaritan's Dilemma: Should Government Help Your Neighbor?* (2008) takes on the political hierarchy by “taking the reader on a journey through America's political and ethical history over the past 80 or so years, showing us the ways in which our altruistic instincts have been slowly eroded by a strategic smear campaign on the part of conservative GOP leaders” (Martin, 2008). Stone makes a cogent, inspiring argument that we must realign our perspective about helping our neighbors. More specifically, that it is the right thing to do through the use of public policy.

*Stone states, “Done right, government help strengthens democracy. Both the New Deal and the Great Society grew out of deep political unrest fueled by visible inequalities of wealth and power. Reformers understood, even long before the word empowerment came into vogue, that what the downtrodden needed most of all was more power. Redistributing power was the heart of the Great Society, captured in the phrase “maximum feasible participation.” Reformers designed community agencies to give poor people a voice in policy decisions affecting their lives and their communities.”*

In these times where people in our communities are suffering from job loss, economic hardship, and distress from a number of issues brought on by a failing economy, which include sky-rocketing health care costs and a struggling social services system, it is hard to believe that politicians and the public don't see that we are all in this together and that we need to rely on our political system and leaders to help re-constitute our communities. Barry Goldwater, John Kennedy, and Paul Krugman represent varying views about the political arena, but each author infers in their writings the importance of helping the common man.

Goldwater believed that it was important to follow the Constitution, which would reduce the interference of Government. Goldwater states in his book, “The turn will come when we entrust the conduct of our affairs to men who understand that their first duty as public officials is to divest themselves of the power they have been given. It will come when Americans in hundreds of communities throughout the nation, decide to put the man in office who is pledged to enforce the Constitution and restore the Republic” (Goldwater, 2009, p. 14). To successfully alter our current paradigm it is imperative that our political leaders put their differences aside and help the people rise up and prosper again.

Kennedy and Goldwater actually had similar beliefs when it came to helping the people of our society, without the intervention of Government. In his famous inaugural speech, Kennedy states, “The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.” Kennedy didn’t believe in handouts. He expressed the importance for the people to act in concert with government, and be connected to their community. In his speech he ended it with the following quote, which illustrates the importance of empowering our communities. He emphasizes his belief by stating (Kennedy, 1961),

*“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”*

Goldwater and Kennedy would agree with what Deborah Stone and the importance of empowering people to support each other through involvement in their communities, resulting in

supporting the social well being of their neighbors. This gives neighbors permission to help strengthen their communities instead of relying completely on government to solve their issues. This isn't to say that government involvement isn't needed, it just allows for government to focus on the issues outlined in the Constitution instead of meddling in local issues.

Paul Krugman looks at the political landscape from a moderate perspective. He highlights the economic health of our country and how it has impacted the common man since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He starts with the economic inequality of the Gilded Age where there were either the really rich or poorest members of our society. There was no middle class. After World War II through the 1970's this inequality was transformed to an era of growth resulting in a middle class. He concludes with the end of the twentieth century came a resurgence of inequality, which was fueled by the Reagan Administration. The overarching message in the book is that our greatest prosperity existed when both the Republicans and Democrats acted in a bipartisan manner.

Like Stone (2008), who writes about the loss of altruism in the political arena, Krugman (2009) rallies around the thought that politics and altruism became strange bedfellows after Ronald Reagan became president. In 1964, Ronald Reagan set the tone for his political career when he made the following remarks about those that are hungry in our society. He is quoted as stating "We were told four years ago that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night," he said, referring to one of John F. Kennedy's campaign lines. "Well that was probably true. They were all on a diet" (Krugman, 2008, p. 105).

Paul Krugman's perspective is most closely aligned with Deborah Stone. The common connection is their belief that Ronald Reagan represented a paradigm shift in how we perceive the importance of being compassionate and helping others that come across hard times. The

belief is that “conservatives who genuflect at the altar of self-reliance stubbornly maintain that entrepreneurship has done more for this country than goodwill, that helping people renders them helpless, and, famously, that government is not the solution to our problems – it is the problem” (Ragionieri, 2008).

Deborah Stone drives home the importance of empowering our communities to become more compassionate and altruistic. “Leading with altruism means recognizing that many people are motivated into advocacy and politics on behalf of others” (Stone, 2008, p. 289). It is important for our society to embrace the idea of serving others. It is through serving others that we come to understand the meaning of the greater good. By helping our neighbor we allow our democracy to flourish.

## References

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